

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

February 7, 2011 at 11:27am

From the US to Uganda, religion is used as instrument of violence

by Jamie Manson

Grace on the Margins

I first saw a picture of David Kato back in December when I attended a consultation on religiously-based homophobia in East Africa held at the United Nations Church Center in New York. Kato's face was on the cover of the Ugandan newspaper *Rolling Stone*, published in October 2010.

The headline read: "100 Picture of Uganda's Top Homos." And just above Kato's head a small banner read: "Hang them."

Though there were pictures of one hundred gay Ugandans inside the pages of the newspaper, Kato was one of two men pictured on the cover. The other photo was of Bishop Christopher Senyonjo, an outspoken advocate for human rights who served as a bishop in the Anglican Church of Uganda from 1974 to 1998.

Senyonjo was one of the speakers at the consultation along with Frank Mugisha, the executive director of Sexual Minorities Uganda, and David Kuria Mbote, executive director of the Gay and Lesbian Coalition of Kenya.

Mugisha's photo was also included in the "100 Ugandan Homos: Hang Them" campaign. It was a powerful moment for me to be the same room with three people who routinely have grave, credible threats made on their lives.

The African speakers were joined by American members of the clergy from Episcopal, Presbyterian, Lutheran, and Unitarian denominations. These ministers joined the conversation in an attempt to reckon with the fact that this growing tide of violent, anti-gay rhetoric is being perpetuated by Christians -- both

in Uganda and in the United States.

The conference was hosted by the Unitarian Universalist United Nations Office.

Just six weeks after this meeting that rhetoric turned deadly. Last week, millions would see the face of David Kato in newspapers and on television around the world after he was found beaten to death with a hammer.

The Ugandan police immediately ruled it a robbery. This was not unexpected, since the Uganda government wants to stave off any opportunity to make a gay, lesbian, or transgendered person into a victim of a hate crime or, even worse, a martyr.

Since 2009 Uganda has made headlines because of "The Anti-Homosexuality Bill." Put before Parliament, the bill would impose life imprisonment on same-sex couples who marry and death by hanging for HIV-infected people who engage in same-sex relationships. Heterosexuals who fail to turn in individuals that they believe to be gay would also serve lengthy jail time.

The bill was drafted in April 2009, just months after three Evangelical leaders from the U.S. offered a series of talks about how to make gay people straight, how gay men often rape teenage boys, and how "the gay movement" has an agenda that will replace marriage-based society with a culture of sexual promiscuity.

The evangelicals claim that they were in Uganda simply to offer "parenting lessons." Yet, the author of the Anti-Homosexuality Bill, a previously unknown Ugandan politician, bragged about having evangelical friends in the U.S.

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Joining the evangelical leaders was Ugandan pastor Martin Ssempe, who has ties to American evangelical leaders as well, including Rick Warren. In footage shown on *Nightline* March 10, Ssempe is seen showing Ugandan police, teachers, and politicians, graphic images of hard-core pornography.

Ssempe tells the crowd that these are images of gay people. The crowd responds with screams, tears, and rage.

Uganda is over 80 percent Christian, and much of the population views homosexuality as a "Western import." For years, LGBT and intersexual Ugandans have been denied health services because of stigmas held by medical practitioners. Politicians frequently use anti-gay slurs in speeches.

But while Ugandans have never looked favorably on homosexuality, anti-gay legislation and sentiment has greatly intensified in the two years since the visit from U.S. evangelical leaders.

Evangelical leaders have tried to distance themselves from these violent anti-gay protests and, most recently, David Kato's murder. But their actions in Uganda beg the question of why they would want to export U.S. culture wars to Africa.

Participants in the consultation at the U.N. church center suggest it has a lot to do with money. Most Ugandan people live in abject poverty.

"The depression that comes with disenfranchisement can quickly turn to aggression," said Reverend Eric

Cherry, a panelist at the consultation. By making LGBT people the evil enemy, they are able to find a scapegoat. In a milieu of disempowerment, Ugandans see an opportunity for power and concrete action.

And this newfound empowerment pays off. Homophobia brings in a lot of money, Cherry continued.

Ssempe, for example, receives money from evangelical churches within the United States. Because the pastor is opposed to condom use, he also benefited financially from the Bush Administration's plan for AIDS relief, which earmarked one-third of its \$15 billion program for abstinence and fidelity programs.

Another panelist at the consultation, Joseph Tolten, who pastors a church in Harlem, sees the Ugandan crisis as an extension of a battle that began in the U.S a decade ago.

For years the religious right has pitted black people and gay people against one another to further their agenda, said Tolten. The Ugandan bill capitalizes on anti-gay anxieties about a family structure under attack in the same way that the fears of African American communities were exploited during the 2008 campaign to overturn Proposition 8 in California.

According to Tolten: because evangelicals feel they are losing the battle in the U.S., they are globalizing.

Jeff Sharlet, an investigative journalist widely credited with exposing the link between the U.S. religious right and the rise of homophobia in Uganda, wrote in a September article in *Harper's*:

[F]or years, American fundamentalists have looked on Uganda as a laboratory for theocracy, though most prefer such terms as government led by God. They sent not just money and missionaries but ideas, and if the money disappeared and the missionaries came and went, the ideas took hold.

Evangelical leaders insist that they are simply trying to support the African people in their fight against this new kind of colonialism. After centuries of oppression at the hands of white people, Africans, they claim, are now having Western notions of acceptable sexual behavior imposed upon them.

But, as Tolten points out, It is amazing that the religious right suddenly wants to raise the voices of African people. African voices never mattered on any other issues like poverty, genocide, and warfare.

The consultation at the U.N. church center is one example of a promising new movement among Christians in the U.S. to fight faith-based movements that spur injustice and violence. While Protestant clergy members were in the majority at the consultation, in the Catholic Church lay organizations are leading the struggle.

Equally Blessed -- a coalition of four Roman Catholic organizations that support full equality for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people and their families both in the church and in civil society -- has requested that the Archbishop Francis Chullikatt, the Vatican Observer to the United Nations, condemn the violence being wrought against gay and lesbian Ugandans.

Chullikatt's predecessor, Archbishop Celestino Migliore, condemned cruel and unusual punishment for homosexuality in December 2009. No further statements have been issued since then.

Paragraph 2358 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church reads: gay and lesbian people must be accepted with respect, compassion and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided.

If the Catholic hierarchy does not speak out against this atrocity, it will be in violation of its own doctrine.

What's more, not only will the church further force itself into collusion with Christian fundamentalists and extremists, it will also perpetuate Christianity's tragic legacy of turning religion into an instrument of violence.

[Jamie L. Manson received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School where she studied Catholic theology and sexual ethics. Her columns for *NCR* earned her a first prize Catholic Press Association award for Best Column/Regular Commentary in 2010.]

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